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ABSTRACT

Although there have been numerous studies of age discrimination in the workplace, little research has addressed the issue of corrective actions taken against poorly performing older workers. This study was conducted to examine the effects of both age and tenure on corrective actions recommended for poor performers. Subjects (N=84) were working age adults drawn from three sources: undergraduate psychology students, Masters of Business Administration students, and employees from a large manufacturing plant in the northeast. Subjects were presented with an experimental packet which contained a memo from a hypothetical manager commenting on a subordinate's recent poor performance. Each memo described the performance of a younger (mean perceived age=32.1) or older (mean perceived age=58.6) employee who had either recently been hired or who had been with the company for several years. Subjects were asked to indicate how they would respond to the employee's poor performance by choosing the most appropriate corrective actions previously scaled in terms of their perceived change orientation. Results of the study indicated that employee age has no effect on the change orientation of corrective actions chosen for poor performers. This contradicts previous research which suggests that subjects recommend corrective actions with higher change orientations for younger workers than for older workers. (ABL)

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# THE IMPACT OF PERCEIVED WORKER AGE ON TREATMENT OF EXPERIENCED AND INEXPERIENCED POOR PERFORMERS

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Although there have been numerous studies of age discrimination in the workplace (Doering, Rhodes, and Schuster, 1983), little research has addressed the issue of corrective actions taken against poor performing older workers. Rosen and Jerdee (1977) briefly touched upon this issue as part of a larger study on managerial decisions. Their results indicated managers were more likely to recommend having an encouraging talk with the poor performing younger worker while they were more likely to recommend reassigning the employee's job for poor performing older workers. In addition, Rosen and Jerdee found that managers anticipated greater difficulty in changing the behavior of the older worker than the younger worker.

One way to interpret these results is to focus on the change orientation of the corrective action recommended. Change orientation is defined as the action's effectiveness in changing an employee's behavior. Rosen and Jerdee's findings suggest that managers are likely to choose actions with higher change orientations for younger workers than for older workers.

Another important variable to consider in research on poor performing older workers is the employee's tenure on the job. It is likely that a manager may be less willing to recommend an action designed to change behavior for an employee with long tenure than an employee with short tenure. The following study was conducted to examine the effects of both age and tenure on corrective actions recommended for poor performers.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Subjects for this study were 84 working age adults (59% male; mean age=32.3 years) drawn from three sources: undergraduate psychology students, MBA students, and employees from a large manufacturing plant in the northeast.

### Procedure and Design

The design of this study was a 2(worker age: younger vs. older)*2(tenure: low vs. high) factorial. Two dependent variables were measured: (1) the change orientation values for the corrective action which each subject rated as most appropriate, and (2) each subjects' ratings of the difficulty they expected in changing the employee's behavior.

Subjects were presented with an experimental packet which contained a memo from a hypothetical manager commenting on a subordinate's recent poor performance. Each memo described the performance of a younger (mean perceived age=32.1) or older (mean perceived age=58.6) employee who had either recently been hired or who had been with the company for several years. The experimental packets also included a short personnel file for the employee which contained a tax form, a picture, and an application for employment. After reading the memo and the personnel file, subjects were asked to imagine themselves as the manager receiving the memo. They were then asked to indicate how they would respond to the employee's poor performance by choosing the most appropriate

corrective actions from among nine corrective actions that had previously been scaled in terms of their perceived change orientation. Subjects were also asked to rate the difficulty they expected in changing the employee's behavior.

## RESULTS

To examine the effect of age and tenure on the change orientation of corrective actions rated most appropriate, a two(worker age) by two (tenure) ANOVA was performed on the change orientation values. Results yielded a significant main effect for tenure ($F=4.13$, $p<.05$.)

A second two(worker age) by two(tenure) ANOVA was conducted using expected difficulty ratings as the dependent variable. There was a significant age by tenure interaction ($F= 4.12$, $p<.05$.) There were no main effects.

## DISCUSSION

Results of this study indicate that employee age has no effect on the change orientation of corrective actions chosen for poor performers. This contradicts previous research which suggests that subjects recommend corrective actions with higher change orientations for younger workers than for older workers. Our results do show, however, that the employee's tenure has a significant effect on the change orientation of corrective actions recommended. The change orientation of actions recommended for short tenured workers were significantly higher than the change orientations recommended for long tenured workers. Since previous studies have

not manipulated tenure, and age and tenure are frequently confounded, it is possible that it was the perceived tenure of the employee, rather than the employee's age, that influenced the choice of corrective actions chosen in prior studies.

Our results also showed an employee age by tenure interaction in the expected difficulty of changing the behavior of a poor performing employee. For the older employee, subjects anticipated greater difficulty in changing the behavior of a long tenured worker than a short tenured worker. Yet, for the younger employee, subjects anticipated greater difficulty in changing the behavior of the short tenured worker. These results also tend to contradict previous research. Rosen and Jerdee found that subjects expected greater difficulty in changing the behavior of an older worker than a younger worker. We found this relationship in the long tenure condition only. In the short tenure condition, subjects expected greater difficulty in changing the behavior of the younger worker than the older worker. These findings again highlight the importance of teasing out the separate effects of worker age and worker tenure when we examine questions relevant to the differential treatment of younger and older workers.

In light of these results, it is clear that tenure does have an effect on the kinds of corrective actions recommended for young and old poor performers. Future research should focus on further defining this relationship. By understanding the factors which influence corrective actions for young and old workers, we can help managers identify situations in which age discrimination may occur.

## REFERENCES

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